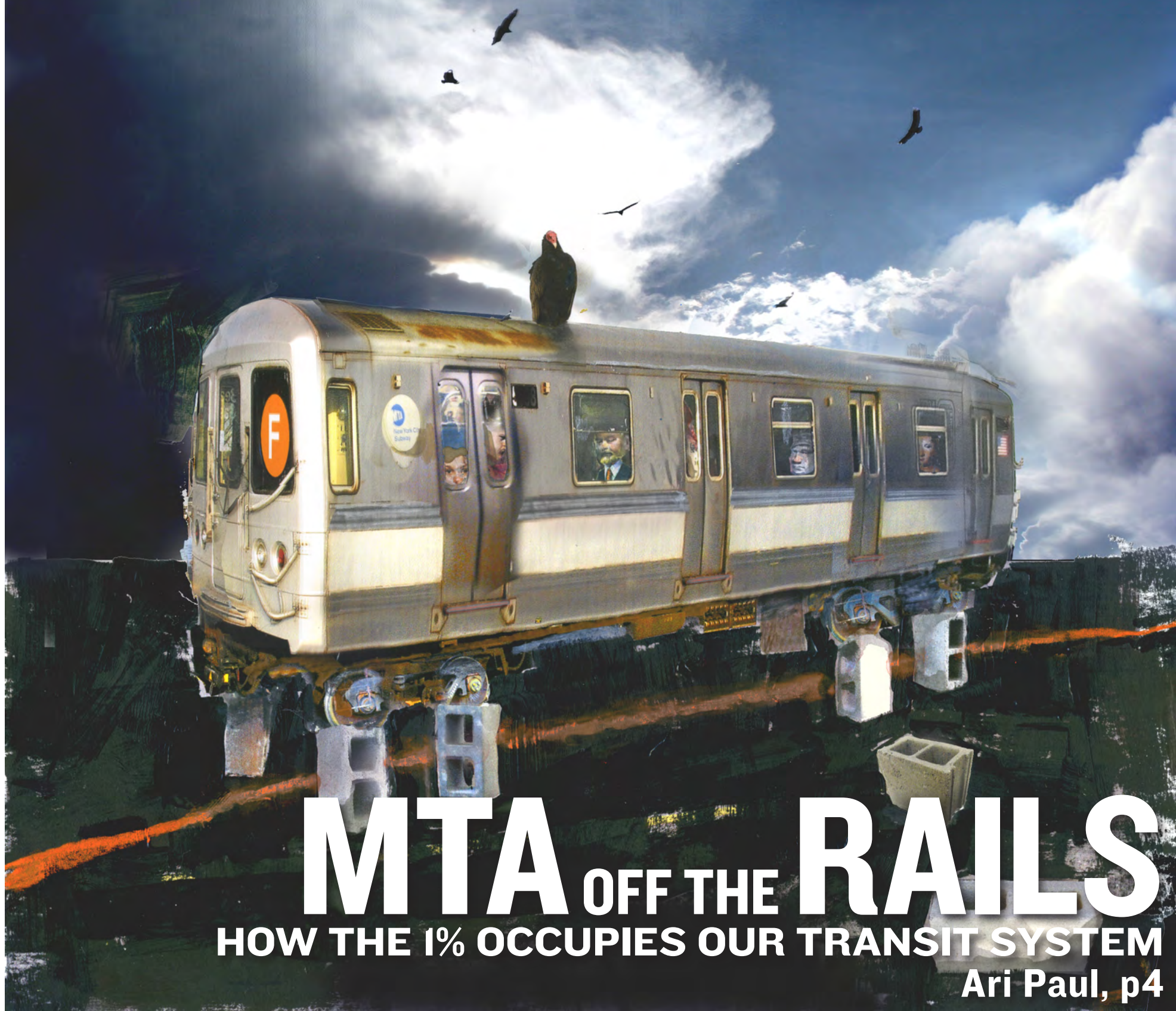


SPECIAL PULL-OUT: NYPD GONE WILD, p10

# THE INDYPENDENT

Issue #174, February 22 – March 20, 2012  
A FREE PAPER FOR FREE PEOPLE



## MTA OFF THE RAILS

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community calendar



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*The Indypendent* is a New York-based free newspaper published 13 times a year on Mondays for our print and on-line readership of more than 100,000. It is produced by a network of volunteers who report, write, edit, draw, design, take photos, distribute, fundraise and provide website management. Since 2000, more than 700 journalists, artists and media activists have participated in this project. Winner of more than 50 New York Community Media Alliance awards, *The Indypendent* is funded by subscriptions, reader donations, grants, merchandise sales, benefits and advertising. We accept submissions that look at news and culture through a critical lens, exploring how systems of power — economic, political and social — affect the lives of people locally and globally. *The Indypendent* reserves the right to edit articles for length, content and clarity.

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EVENTS@GMAIL.COM.

WED FEB 22

10-6pm • Free

3RD ANNUAL PILGRIMAGE FROM ELLIS ISLAND TO ELIZABETH DETENTION CENTER. Join immigrant rights advocates for a 12-mile walk, beginning at Liberty State Park in Jersey City, to the gates of the Elizabeth Detention Center, to bring attention to the approximately 2,000 immigrants currently being held there. RSVP to Kathy O'Leary.

908-773-0751 • kolearypcnj@gmail.com

THU FEB 23

7pm • \$10

FILM AND DISCUSSION: *THE CITY—VISUALIZING THE PAST, REBRANDING THE PRESENT I, II, III & IV*. Filmmaker Jessica Jacobs will be present for the screening of her four-part film, which mixes documentary, audio-visual and sound to represent the people of Jordan, Syria and other major Arab cities.

Alwan for the Arts, 16 Beaver St

646-732-3261 • alwanforthearts.org

SAT FEB 25

1-3pm • Free

RALLY: ANTI-FRACKING. Join fellow activists to call for a state-wide ban on fracking. The rally will also include guest speakers, workshops and training sessions.

St. John the Divine

1047 Amsterdam Ave

718-943-9085 • eweltman@fwwatch.org

SUN FEB 26

2-4pm • \$5-\$25

V-DAY: OWS *VAGINA MONOLOGUES*. Join Eve Ensler and women from OWS for a performance of this V-Day mainstay. All ticket proceeds will benefit The National Domestic Workers Alliance and The Voices of Women Organizing Project.

Cooper Union Hall, 7 E 7th St

212-787-3903

owsvaginamonologues.eventbrite.com

MON FEB 27

All day • Free

NATIONAL DAY OF ACTION: OCCUPY OUR FOOD SUPPLY. Demonstrate your commitment to creating local, sustainable, just food systems and resisting Monsanto and Cargill's corporate stranglehold of the food supply. Anyone can participate. For more information, contact the address below.

owsfood@gmail.com

MON FEB 27

6pm • Free

PANEL: FREEDOM TO OCCUPY? RECLAIM-  
ING SPACE AND REINVENTING PROTEST.

This panel of academics and activists will discuss the strategies of the Occupy Movement to reclaim space, interrogate contemporary economic policy and rethink the meaning of democracy.

CUNY Center for the Humanities

365 Fifth Ave, Rm 9100

212-817-2005 • centerforthehumanities.org

TUE FEB 28

7pm • \$5 Sugg

PRESENTATION: "PINAY HERSTORIES."

Filipinas for Rights and Empowerment presents a night of readings and performances with migrant women, students, victims of trafficking, activists, nurses and domestic workers, whose stories highlight the resilience of Filipino women and the power of community in their lives.

Bluestockings, 172 Allen St

212-777-6028 • bluestockings.com

TUE FEB 28

9:30am • Free

RALLY: PACK THE COURT! SOLIDARITY  
WITH FLAUM WORKERS.

Join us as the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) hears final arguments on whether Flaum's owner, Moshe Grunhut, will be ordered to pay workers \$260,000 in back pay for violating workers' rights to strike.

NLRB, 2 Metrotech Center, 5th Fl, Brklyn

410-829-6834 • brandworkers.org

SAT MAR 3

8pm • \$15-\$18

MUSIC: CAROLYN HESTER AT THE PEOPLE'S VOICE CAFE. Hester was one of the first women folksingers of the Urban Folk Revival of the 1950s. Her performance will include traditional ballads, political songs, and classics by her friends Pete Seeger, Bob Dylan and Tom Paxton.

The Community Church of New York

Unitarian Universalist, 40 E 35th St

212-787-3903 • peoplesvoicecafe.org

THU MAR 8

7pm • Free

CREATIVE ACTIVISM THURSDAYS: DAVID GRAEBER. Graeber will discuss the similarities between primordial cultures and social movements.

Yes Lab, 20 Cooper Sq, 5th Fl

FEB—MAR

UPCOMING EVENTS

TUE FEB 21 • 7:30pm

PANEL: *REDEFINING BLACK POWER — REFLECTIONS ON THE STATE OF BLACK AMERICA*.

Join *Redefining Black Power's* editor, Joanne Griffith for a special discussion on women and media in the age of Obama.

Sliding scale: \$6/\$10/\$15

FRI FEB 24 • 6-9pm

RECEPTION: TWO WHO MADE A DIFFERENCE — CELEBRATING VINIE BURROWS AND ESTHER JACKSON.

This event will be held at in the Rectory Hall at Union Theological Seminary, located at 3041 Broadway. Drinks and a light buffet will be served.

Sliding scale: \$20-\$100

TUE FEB 28 • 7:30pm

SCREENING & DISCUSSION: *GADDAFI'S LIBYA — DISCUSSION WITH FILMMAKER NIZAR ABOUD*.

Gaddafi's Libya examines Libya's social fabric and the devastation wrought during the four-decade-long Gaddafi regime.

Sliding scale: \$6/\$10/\$15

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SAT MAR 10

1-5pm • \$20

CLASS: *INDYPENDENT* REPORTING WORKSHOP.

Come learn how to report and write articles for *The Indypendent* and other radical media outlets. Email ehenderson@indypendent.org to register by March 5. No one turned away due to lack of funds.

666 Broadway, Suite 510

212-904-1282 • indypendent.org

FRI MAR 16-SUN MAR 18

Various Times • \$15-\$65

CONFERENCE: LEFT FORUM 2012 — OCCUPY THE SYSTEM: CONFRONTING GLOBAL CAPITALISM. Left Forum convenes the largest annual conference of leftist and progressive intellectuals, activists, academics and organizations. Participants discuss

differences, commonalities and ideas for understanding and transforming the world. Keynote speakers include Michael Moore, Chris Hedges and Frances Fox Piven. Pace University, 1 Pace Plaza  
212-817-2002 • leftforum.org

FRI MAR 16

6:30-8:30pm • Free

BOOK TALK: *THE RIGHTS OF THE PEOPLE: HOW OUR SEARCH FOR SAFETY INVADERS OUR LIBERTIES*. Pulitzer Prize-winning author David K. Shipler will discuss his new book, which focuses on violations of civil liberties post-9/11.

The Frederick P. Rose Auditorium

41 Cooper Sq

212-353-4100 • cooper.edu

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WITHOUT YOU.

— STAFF OF THE INDYPENDENT

# Shale-Shocked

## AN ANTI-FRACKING REVOLT WASHES ACROSS UPSTATE NEW YORK

BY ELLEN CANTAROW

This is a story about water, the land surrounding it, and the lives it sustains. Clean water should be a right: there is no life without it. New York is what you might call a “water state.” Its rivers and their tributaries start with the St. Lawrence, the Hudson, the Delaware and the Susquehanna. The best known of its lakes are Great Lakes Erie and Ontario, Lake George and the Finger Lakes. Its brooks, creeks and trout streams are fishermen’s lore.

Far below this rippling wealth there’s a vast, rocky netherworld called the Marcellus Shale. Stretching through southern New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio and West Virginia, the shale contains bubbles of methane, the remains of life that died 400 million years ago. Gas corporations have lusted for the methane in the Marcellus since at least 1967 when one of them plotted with the Atomic Energy Agency to explode a nuclear bomb to unleash it. That idea died, but it’s been reborn in the form of a technology invented by Halliburton Corporation: high-volume horizontal hydraulic fracturing — or “fracking” for short.

Fracking uses prodigious amounts of water laced with sand and a startling menu of poisonous chemicals to blast the methane out of the shale. At hyperbaric bomb-like pressures, this technology propels five to seven million gallons of sand-and-chemical-laced water a mile or so down a drill hole into the shale.

Up comes the methane — along with about a million gallons of wastewater containing the original fracking chemicals and other substances that were also in the shale, including radioactive elements and carcinogens. There are 400,000 such wells in the United States. Surrounded by rumbling machinery and serviced by tens of thousands of diesel trucks, this nightmare technology for energy release has turned rural areas in 34 U.S. states into toxic industrial zones.

Shale gas isn’t the conventional kind that lit your grandmother’s stove. It’s one of those “extreme energy” forms, so difficult to produce that merely accessing it poses unprecedented dangers to the planet. In every fracking state except New York, where a moratorium against the process has been

in effect since 2010, the gas industry has contaminated ground water, sickened people, poisoned livestock and killed wildlife.

At a time when the International Energy Agency reports that we have five more years of fossil fuel use at current levels before the planet goes into irreversible climate change, fracking has a greenhouse gas footprint larger than that of coal. And with the greatest water crisis in human history underway, fracking injects mind-numbing quantities of purposely-poisoned fresh water into the Earth. As for the trillions (repeat: trillions) of gallons of wastewater generated by the industry, getting rid of it is its own story. Fracking has also been linked to earthquakes: with eleven happening in Ohio alone (normally not an earthquake zone) over the past year.

But for once, this story isn’t about tragedy. It’s about a resistance movement that has arisen to challenge some of the most powerful corporations in history.

### NEW YORK’S ‘LITTLE REVOLUTION’

While most anti-fracking activists have focused on responding to harms already done, New York State’s resistance has been waging a battle to keep harm at bay. Jack Ossont, a former helicopter pilot, has been active all his life in the state’s environmental and social battles. He calls fracking “the tsunami issue of New York. It washes across the entire landscape.”

Sandra Steingraber, a biologist and scholar-in-residence at Ithaca College, terms the movement “the biggest since abolition and women’s rights in New York.” This past November, when the Heinz Foundation awarded Steingraber \$100,000 for her environmental activism, she gave it to the anti-fracking community.

Last October, I discovered a sprawl of



Ruffalo and Debra Winger have joined the movement. Josh Fox, also of the Catskills, has brought the fracking industry and its victims to international audiences through his award-winning documentary film *Gasland*. “Fracking is a pretty scary prospect,” says Wes Gillingham, planning director for Catskill Mountainkeeper. “It’s created a community of people that wouldn’t have existed before.”

About four years ago, sheltered by Patterson’s stay against fracking, small discussion groups began in people’s homes. At that time, only a few activists were advocating outright bans on fracking; the rest of the fledgling movement was more cautiously advocating temporary moratoria.

loosely connected, grassroots groups whose names announce their counties and their long-term vision: Sustainable Otsego, Committee to Preserve the Finger Lakes, Chenango Community Action for Renewable Energy, Gas-Free Seneca, Catskill Citizens for Safe Energy, Catskill Mountainkeeper. Of just those few (there are many more), only the last has a paid staff. All the others are run by volunteers.

“In Middlefield, we’re nothing special. We’re just regular people who got together and learned, and reached in our pockets to go to work on this,” says Kelly Branigan, co-founder of the group Middlefield Neighbors. Her organization helped spearhead one of the movement’s central campaigns: using local zoning ordinances to ban fracking. “It’s inspiring, it’s awesome, and it’s America—its own little revolution.”

Consider this an environmental Occupy Wall Street. It knows no divisions of social class or political affiliation. Everyone needs clean water — farmers and professors, journalists and teachers, innkeepers and brewery owners. Actors and Catskill residents Mark

Since then, a veritable ban cascade has washed across the state. And in local elections last November, scores of anti-fracking candidates, many of whom had never run for office before, displaced pro-gas incumbents in positions as town councilors, town supervisors and county legislators. As the movement has grown in strength and influence, gas corporations like Exxon Mobil and Conoco Philips, along with Marcellus Shale corporations like Chesapeake Energy, have spent millions of dollars on advertising, lobbying and political campaign contributions to counter it.

### SHALESHOCK

Autumn Stoscheck, a young organic apple farmer from the village of Van Etten just south of New York’s Finger Lakes, had none of this in mind in 2008 when she invited a group of neighbors to her living room to talk about fracking. She’d simply heard enough about the process to be terrified.

*Continued on page 8*





# Justice

TEXT BY ARI PAUL AND  
PHOTOS BY SAM LEWIS

Perhaps nothing is more emblematic of the city’s music scene than the jazz artist. And while the genre isn’t as popular as it once was, these talents are still in demand at many of the world-famous jazz clubs in



Manhattan, like the Blue Note and the Village Vanguard. In fact, many of these clubs still turn tremendous profits. Yet, jazz musicians — freelancers who are paid per gig with no benefits — are second-class citizens in American Federation of Musicians Local 802, through which the bulk of the union’s symphony and Broadway members enjoy employer-paid medical benefits and pensions.

Jazz musicians have begun fighting back with a campaign to pressure the major clubs into signing collective bargaining agreements that would set a minimum pay rate for jazz arts, create a pension plan and codify a process for dealing with disputes between

**AND ALL THAT JAZZ:** (Counter-clockwise from top) Jazz pianist Bertha Hope teaches a young student at Manna House Workshops, a cultural center in East Harlem that offers music and dance lessons; Hope rehearses at the Musicians Local 802 with the Bob Ward band; Former jazz musician Bob Cranshaw explains to a radio interviewer that jazz musicians often aren’t part of union locals and, as a result, many do not have pensions; Hope, who has a Masters degree in early education, has taught music classes throughout her career in order to make ends meet.





# for Jazz Artists

artists and club owners. The musicians also want royalties for club recordings — if the clubs profit from streaming recorded performances, the musicians would get a cut. So far, the campaign has been limited to union activists leafleting clubs and letting jazz fans know about their plight.

The struggle began in the early 1990s, when jazz musicians formed a caucus within the union to address their unique issues. Broadway and orchestra musicians have more regular jobs and operate as part of a larger group, whereas jazz artists have to compete against each other and form their own style. “It’s been an every-man-for-himself environment,” said Todd Bryant Weeks, a Local 802 business agent. “They have to be independent.”

This type of work carries a great deal of economic insecurity. The Broadway and orchestra players have fairly consistent work, while a jazz artist can encounter dry spells. Weeks noted that clubs will hire band leaders, who in turn hire jazz artists who arrive to the show without knowing who they will be playing with or how much the other artists are getting paid.

The jazz artists’ caucus made some headway in securing contracts for performers at the Village Vanguard and for jazz instructors at The New School in the 1990s. A legislative plan to secure pension benefits was devised, in which Local 802 lobbied Albany to rescind a tax on club admissions, moving that money instead into defined pension plans. Then-governor George Pataki signed legislation that rescinded the tax but did not compel the club owners to use that money for pensions. “It became kind of a toothless law,” Weeks said. “This was sort of a dead end for us.”

In an article for the union’s website, Weeks noted that there was another component of the inequality between jazz musicians and players at bigger venues: jazz is historically performed by people of color. “From the days of traveling vaudeville and tent shows, through to the modern civil rights era and beyond, black musicians have been subjected to second-class lodgings and travel accommodations and abject racism, particularly in the Deep South,” he wrote. “Historically, jazz musicians are among the most abused of all professional performers in our history. Pit bands, especially ones made up of blacks, from whence many of the early jazz ensembles sprung, were often treated as a lower caste by more visible actors, singers and dancers.”

Now, the pressure is on the clubs themselves, many of which have plenty of money to throw around. The union claims, for example, that Blue Note has still turned a profit even during the economic downturn. Jazz artists note that without workers like themselves, who spend their lives honing their craft and practicing for hours each day, there would be no profits for the club

owners or the service workers they employ.

Furthermore, the union argues that the clubs could easily meet these economic demands. For instance, Weeks said, it believes that a pension contribution could be as little as the cost of two drinks at a club, and that a place like Blue Note could pay the cost of pension benefits for three performers with one customer’s cover charge.

Local 802 estimates that it has around 500 members who play jazz, are older than 40, and don’t have a defined retirement plan. About 20 percent of the union’s 8,500 members are jazz musicians, although some of them have other gigs on Broadway. Weeks estimates that about 400 musicians are active in the campaign, but added that “many jazz artists are afraid of reprisals and will not come out publicly on this issue until we have reached critical mass.”

So far, no club has joined the union at the bargaining table. Various club owners told *The New York Times* that pension contributions would be too costly and impractical, and although they think these benefits are good ideas in theory, they aren’t tenable in the current economy.

“I think it’s a great idea philosophically, but the devil’s in the details,” Iridium owner Ron Sturm told the *Times*. “How do you do it?”

So far, the union hasn’t called for boycotts, but it is bringing the message to club patrons, who could put pressure on the owners. Local 802 organizes regular leafletting sessions outside clubs with the hope that jazz fans will realize that they have a vested interest in supporting performers.

“We encourage people to go in and support these clubs but also to send the message that they support [the campaign],” Weeks said. “They can also lobby their local City Council members or state representatives to get behind this issue.”

If progress is made with just one club, the union believes, jazz musicians can achieve some of their contract goals with little acrimony.

“If one club comes forward, we are looking for ways to celebrate that club,” Weeks said. “We can get the word out that if you are coming to New York, you should book at this club. And it will make the other clubs look bad.”

## TO LEARN MORE...

LOCAL 802, AMERICAN  
FEDERATION OF MUSICIANS  
LOCAL802AFM.ORG

JUSTICE FOR JAZZ ARTISTS  
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# Economy Connection

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*a project of the Union for Radical Political Economics*



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# Collision Course

## HOW THE ONE PERCENT DESTROYS OUR GREAT TRANSIT SYSTEM

BY ARI PAUL

The conventional narrative of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's perpetual budget problems goes a little like this: Albany legislators, mired in self-interest and tied in the knots of party politics, fail to adequately fund the downstate transit system for millions of commuters. Further, unions, especially Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 100, which represents nearly 34,000 New York City subway and bus workers, drain the operating budget with workers' wages, pension and health benefits and cumbersome work rules.

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority's (MTA) bosses pour this tale into the tabloids every now and again to explain why fares are rising, service is being cut and workers are expected to make contract concessions, but the truth is far different from that. To truly understand why TWU Local 100 and the MTA are locked in such a difficult bargaining situation and why the authority has a nearly \$10 billion budget shortfall, riders and workers alike need to understand the intersection of the transportation authority and the financial sector.

Though the MTA is not a government agency in the traditional sense, its board of directors is mostly appointed by the governor and the New York City mayor. The MTA is a public authority that gives its governing body independent authority that state and city agencies often lack. There are worker and rider advocates on the board; though they are permitted to speak at the monthly board meetings, these members aren't allowed to vote on budgets and other measures.

The MTA has two main budgets. The operational budget includes labor and the day-to-day costs of running the system, while the capital budget pays for construction, which includes station beautification and larger projects such as the Second Avenue subway and the Fulton Street transit hub. Money comes to the authority in a number of ways: fares, state taxes, federal funding and bond issues. The last item is where things get complicated.

The MTA issues tax-free bonds to financial institutions — among them, Goldman Sachs — which earn interest as tax-free income. The payments for the bonds come back to the MTA, but only for use in capital construction. In addition, money appropriated as part of Obama's stimulus plan goes to the capital budget, and federal guidelines allow for up to 10 percent of that sum to move over to the operational budget. In the previous set of MTA budget cuts, rider advocates and union members urged the MTA to use 10 percent of its federal funds to alleviate the pain (as other urban transportation systems had done around the country), but then-MTA Chairman Jay Walder refused, citing that it was not a good practice to move money between the budgets.

At present, the MTA and TWU Local 100 are locked in tough contract negotiations, and management has set forth demands the union won't accept: a wage freeze for

the term of the new contract, a restructuring of overtime and differential pay, a give-back of five vacation days, a raise in employee contributions to healthcare benefits to 10 percent of pay and the institution of part-time work in bus operation. According to news outlets like the *New York Post*, the MTA says the union needs to give back because operational expenses are bringing the agency to the brink of insolvency, and surely nobody wants that.

No one denies the precariousness of the MTA's budget situation. At issue is the cause of the crisis. A pamphlet from Occupy Wall Street's (OWS) labor outreach committee claims that from 2000 to 2008, Goldman Sachs earned \$28.8 million in MTA bond commissions and that in 2011, the MTA paid "over \$2 billion out of its \$12.7 billion budget in debt to banks and bond owners." According to the pamphlet, the state comptroller's office stated that "by 2018 MTA debt to banks and MTA bond owners may consume 23 percent of the MTA budget." Government

bonds, like MTA bonds, are popular items for financial institutions because they are stable investments to balance against risky private-sector financial instruments.



DAVID HOLLERBACH.COM

### WORKERS AND RIDERS UNITED?

In addition to petty management and abysmal working conditions, yet another headache for transit workers struggling for a fair contract is a public that often views them as greedy layabouts or, worse, ambassadors of a wasteful Metropolitan Transportation Authority.

During the transit strike of 2005, Mayor Michael Bloomberg, the city's wealthiest resident, called the strikers thugs. Public opinion was divided with many liberals expressing resentment toward the workers. One of my more progressive, though monied, friends complained at the time that transit workers didn't deserve more pay or benefits, because so many were rude to him ("You try keeping up such a cheery attitude working 40 hours a week underground," I thought at the time.)

The historical theme is obvious. Going back to the 1930s, there's been an understanding among riders that these low-class workers are destined to stay in this sorry state, and any effort to better themselves was messing with the natural order. At one time these agitators were Irish thugs. Now they're African-American and West Indian thugs. Either way, the narrative goes, these mopes with cushy civil service jobs need to make do with less.

I spent three years as a transit reporter for a weekly newspaper, and in that time I covered a tremendous amount of worker suffering, and often, unnecessary deaths in the name of providing this valuable service. I started my time with two track workers being struck and killed by trains during repair work in 2007. Both accidents were avoidable and resulted in little change

when it came to work safety rules, despite an earlier study that the hazards of underground train work were similar to those in coal mining. The last story I filed was the sentencing of a young man who stabbed bus driver Edwin Thomas to death in Brooklyn, for refusing to give him a transfer because he didn't pay his fare.

I vividly remember hearing station agent Tamesh Ramroop, during a 2010 rally to stop station worker layoffs, describe how in his short tenure he'd watched violent criminals roam the subways with impunity, and in one instance, how one locked him in his booth and sprayed gasoline inside in a failed effort to set him ablaze. What did his superiors care about after this incident? Not his safety, but that he stay after his shift to ensure that all the cash collected was dried.

And yet he and others are seen as idle relics of the past still collecting paychecks. Other workers act as a target of rider outrage, especially bus operators, who, besides having one of the hardest jobs in the system, are the victims of more assaults by riders than any other transit job title.

Riders have legitimate gripes: The fare is going up, trains are more crowded, stations are filthier, and bus lines have been cut. And they see the workers as the face of all this, while press organs for the MTA moan that these ungrateful civil servants want a bigger share of the agency's ever more crunched budget. What's often ignored is that these two groups want the same thing: More accountability, more responsible spending, more investment from Albany and more service.

It has historically been hard for the transit workers union to make this connection. In the last round of contract negotiations,

union President John Samuelson invited rider advocates to join the workers at the bargaining table, but to no avail. The union has made station cleanliness and an assurance that student MetroCards remain free contract demands.

Two years ago when the MTA pushed station agent layoffs, and while Samuelson was acting to protect members' jobs, the union campaign's central focus was ensuring rider safety. Since then, the campaign has joined forces with rider groups to advocate more funding from Albany and Washington, and shifting MTA money from its capital budget into operational expenses.

Occupy Wall Street protesters are making the connection by channelling rider frustration with the MTA. Other community activists have sided with the transit workers during this go-around. But there are still challenges. The union has a tendency to alienate allies due to its constant internal strife. Racial tensions linger, and there will always be a rivalry between train and bus workers. Union activists are split between revolutionary anti-capitalists and pragmatic, apolitical members who just want a wage increase.

It's a struggle for the union to overcome, especially around questions on which the union and rider advocates don't agree, such as reforms that would make the system more efficient but might undermine existing seniority rules. But real rider solidarity will develop with an increase in class-consciousness, something we've seen on the rise since Occupy Wall Street began.

And that is perhaps why the transit workers were the first union to come out in support of the Zuccotti Park occupation.

—A.P.





**THEY MAKE THE CITY RUN:** An MTA mechanic repairs a broken escalator at the 34th Street-Herald Square subway station in Manhattan.

Essentially, the MTA is paying interest on investor money that is used to bankroll new construction. But these projects are costly, and as the Federal Transit Administration pointed out last year, the MTA's East Side access project is \$800 million behind schedule, and the Second Avenue subway project will open a year late, *amNewYork* reported. Union members have often told the MTA board that it would be cheaper to install light-rail or Bus Rapid Transit on the East Side of Manhattan, rather than the Second Avenue subway.

Thomas Angotti, a Hunter College professor in the Department of Urban Affairs and Planning, noted that for these projects, "from a long-term planning perspective, the only rationale is real estate development." New subway development, Angotti said, has historically been promoted and funded by real estate interests that wanted developments to have train service.

In the modern era, the construction industry is a powerful lobby that naturally prefers expensive underground projects (which provide more lucrative transit construction contracts) to light-duty surface work.

"It's the growth machine," Angotti explained, "which includes construction unions, all the big construction firms that want to see growth in the city, as well as real estate." While there is an alliance among transit unions and rider advocates that acts as a counter-weight, he noted that "they're not powerful enough. They're definitely in the minority."

As a result, the construction and real estate interests — through their proximity to City Hall and the governor — push through

a misguided transportation policy.

"Light rail is more rational and logical," Angotti said. "Stop building new subway lines in places where they're least needed. Improve the surface transportation system. So what does the MTA do? The first thing they do is cut buses."

Occupy Wall Street has teamed up with TWU Local 100, one of the first major unions to come out in support of the Zuccotti Park occupation last September, to get the message out about the financial and real estate sectors' role in the MTA's budget problems. Jackie DiSalvo, a member of the OWS labor outreach committee, explained that OWS members are more vocal about directing anger at the banks.

"I don't know if [TWU Local 100] wants to antagonize the banks," she said. "Often times, OWS can do things the unions can't."

For OWS, solving the MTA's budget problems is simple: "We've called to cancel the debt for the MTA," DiSalvo said.

That's likely to be unrealistic in the current political climate. But DiSalvo and the OWS labor outreach committee are raising important questions: Why is it when the MTA faces a budget crunch, the only people asked to make sacrifices are riders and transit workers, when so much of the authority's debt is owed to banks to finance costly construction projects?

As far as reform goes, some politicians and transit advocates have said it is time to end the quasi-public nature of what is supposed to be a wholly public service. For Angotti, the path is clear.

"The only solution is public subsidy," he said. "You have to."

# Tunnel Vision

## THE SUBWAY MAKES US ALL NEW YORKERS

BY NICHOLAS POWERS

Day two of the 2005 transit workers strike: We crossed the Brooklyn Bridge and looked behind us. What seemed like everyone in the borough streamed over it and gushed into Manhattan. Without a subway, New York was a giant overflowing bathtub. Unable to pour into the city beneath the city and flow through its tunnels, millions of people spilled into streets, over bridges and packed taxis until faces pressed against windows like pancakes. Without the subway, not only does New York cease to be the city that never sleeps — it ceases to be.

The restless, nervous energy of New York, the sense that anything can happen — is happening — rises from below. Our subway drives the city's mythic image as a dynamo churning at the center of the world. And yet our natural attitude toward it is a blasé annoyance. It's loud. It's crowded. In winter it's a homeless shelter. In summer it's freezing with conditioned air. It's dangerous. A bomb could go off so if you see something, say something. The subway is always wrong in some way. We have this infinite grievance because the subway shapes us against our will. Whether we are born here or have arrived fresh from a state with too much sky, the subway imperceptibly transforms us into New Yorkers. Each ride teaches us to think like New York. We learn to judge, to hustle, to posture and to ignore. We learn the city, unconsciously; until one ride, somehow we know to wake from a nap at our stop and stumble through foggy sleep out of the train. That is when we arrive in New York. That is when it gives us its invisible urban dictionary.

Each city has unspoken rules, a tacit collective conscience. New York's rules on race, class, nearness, trust and who to value or throw away are first ground into us in the rickety trains rocketing through the dark. If we could materialize that invisible urban dictionary, here are a few of the entries we would read:

**1 THE HUSH** In the subway, silence is a social fact. New Yorkers enforce a moratorium on noise with extinguishing stares or sighs, tactful isolation or an outright "shut the fuck up." A loud rider is like a man smoking in a submarine, a polluter of confined existence. But the silence is not emptiness.

Crisscrossing it are stares of surveillance or voyeurism of ethnic, class and sexual

others. But once the appraisal is done, the hush congeals into a mood more desperate than courteous. Rocking like infants in the train we go from being vulnerable to strangers, to being vulnerable *with* them. In the hard seats, half-asleep or half-dead from the city's endless dynamo, we ask and are asked for quiet and realize we usually have no choice but to say yes.

**2 THE SECURITY GAZE** The shouting Pentecostal Jamaican holy-roller is annoying but safe. The homeless man shaking invisible bugs out of his hair is not. Each subway ride, New Yorkers scan each other for danger. When we walk into the train car a single sweeping gaze maps the safest space to wedge our bodies. In that instant, skin color, clothing and body language are filtered through the city's ideology. At the safe pole are white-skinned, nicely dressed riders and at the menacing pole are dark-skinned, foreign and poor riders. Black teens are terrifying. Unless of course you are one. Then, the terror comes at being targeted. Ride after ride the security gaze becomes embedded in our minds. It follows us to the surface of the city where, if you are targeted by its cross-hairs, a single wrong move can end with death. Like Sean Bell. Like Amadou Diallo.

**3 MUSICAL CHAIRS** The moment comes when you look and look and look again. No seat is open except next to the smelly homeless man. And you take it. Because you're tired. Because you ache. Because the subway is a game of musical chairs. And you steal it quickly before the other rider does, who now turns and looks with a scowl for a place to stand. You won a seat. But as the train rolls along the tracks, the friction of bodies against each other rubs off the psychological armor of the self. You are learning, against your will, to share space with those you fear or feel disgust towards. Sitting cheek by jowl, they are too close to you to be anything but human. The make-up and religious markings, the skin-color and foreign language become transparent and their face shines in a radiant reflection of your own. It doesn't happen often, this epiphany. But it does.

**4 THE MONOLOGUE** She was talking to herself, staring plaintively up at an invisible listener. A few eyebrows lifted and then papers were held up in front of

Continued on page 12



## Shale-Shocked

*Continued from page 3*

Like other informal fracking meetings that were launched that year, this was a “listening group.” Its ground rules: listen, talk, but don’t criticize. “There was a combination of landowners, farmers like us, and young anarchist-activists with experience in other movements,” she told me. Stoscheck’s neighbors knew nothing about fracking, but “they were really mistrustful of the government and large gas corporations and felt they were in collusion.”

These groups became the first grassroots anti-fracking organizations. Stoscheck and her colleagues called theirs Shaleshock. One of its first achievements was a PowerPoint presentation, “Drilling 101,” which introduces viewers to the Marcellus Shale and what hydraulic fracturing does to it.

When Helen Slottje, a 44-year-old lawyer, saw “Drilling 101” at a Shaleshock forum in 2009, she was “horrified.” She and her husband David had abandoned their corporate law careers to move to Ithaca in 2000. “We traded corporate law practice in Boston for New York State and less stressful work—or so we thought. New York’s beauty seemed worth it.” When news reports about fracking started appearing, the Slottjes thought about leaving. “I kept saying, ‘What’ll happen if fracking comes to New York? We’ll have to move.’” “Drilling 101” made her reconsider. Then she visited Dimock, Penn., 70 miles southeast of Ithaca and that sealed the deal.

By 2009, Dimock, a picturesque rural village, had become a fracking hell. Houston-based Cabot Oil & Energy had started drilling there the year before. Shortly after, people started to notice that their drinking water had darkened. Some began experiencing bouts of dizziness and headaches; others developed sores after bathing.

For a while, Cabot trucked water to Dimock’s residents, but stopped in November when a judge declined to order the company to continue deliveries. The Environmental Protection Agency was going to start water service to Dimock in the first week of January, but withdrew the offer, claiming further water tests were needed. Outraged New Yorkers organized water caravans to help their besieged neighbors.

“When I went to Dimock,” says Slottje, “I saw well-drilling, huge trucks, muddy crisscrossing pipeline paths cutting through the woods, disposal pits, sites of diesel spills, dusty coatings on plants, noisy compressor stations—you name it. So I decided to put my legal background to work to prevent the same thing from happening where I lived. We’d been corporate lawyers before. We know the sort of resources the energy corporations have. The grassroots people have nothing. And they have this behemoth coming at them.”

In May 2009, the Slottjes became full-

time pro bono lawyers for the movement. One of their first services was to reinterpret New York’s constitutional home rule provision, which had allowed local ordinances to trump state laws until 1981. In that year, the State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC)’s Division of Mineral Resources exempted gas corporations from local restrictions.

“I spent thousands of hours on the research,” says Slottje. “And then last August we were brave enough to go public and say the emperor has no clothes.” The Slottjes’ reinterpretation of the provision was simple enough: the state regulates the gas industry; towns and villages can’t regulate it, but what they can do is keep its operations off their land through the use of zoning ordinances.

### ZONING OUT FRACKING

The town of Ulysses is nestled in the heart of the state’s burgeoning wine country in the Finger Lakes region. In 2010, a grassroots group, Concerned Citizens of Ulysses (CCU), asked the Slottjes to speak with members of the town board, which controls Ulysses’ planning and zoning laws.

The board members opposed fracking, but didn’t know how to prevent it. While the board talked with the Slottjes, CCU activists drafted a petition. If enough registered Ulysses voters signed on, the board would have the popular backing it needed to declare a ban. A six-month-long door-to-door campaign followed.

“There was a lot of education going on in Ulysses at the town board and at forums, as we were going house to house. Even people who would sign the petition would say, ‘Tell me a little bit more about it.’ And in that

owner is suing that town on the same basis. The cases are pending.

Meanwhile bans proliferate. Six upstate New York counties have zoned out fracking, including Binghamton, which declared a ban in December. Ommegang, an organic brewery in Cooperstown, mobilized 300 other businesses, including Cooperstown’s Chamber of Commerce, to support more bans in the region.

Chefs for the Marcellus, a group headed by Food Network star Mario Batali, has urged Governor Andrew Cuomo to ban fracking at the state level. “Call it home-rule democracy,” says Adrian Kuzminsky, chair of the Cooperstown-based organization Sustainable Otsego. “If local communities can seize control over their destinies, a giant step will have been taken toward a sustainable future.”

This past October, activists prepared to take on the state’s DEC. That agency is caught in a perpetual conflict of interest: on the one hand, protecting the environment; on the other, regulating the industries that exploit it. In fact, the 1981 legislation exempting gas corporations from New York’s

**From Binghamton to Cooperstown to the Finger Lakes, local governments have banned fracking. ‘Call it home-rule democracy,’ said one organizer.**

home rule had been written by Greg Sovas, then head of DEC’s Division of Mineral Resources.

Guidelines for the hydraulic fracturing industry were first issued by the department in late 2009 and rejected in 2010 under withering public criticism. Then-Governor David Paterson declared a moratorium on fracking in the state pending DEC revisions. Revised guidelines appeared this past September in the form of 1,537 mind-numbing pages bearing the title, “Supplemental Generic Environmental Impact Statement,” commonly abbreviated as SGEIS.

### A WORLD OF WATER

In study groups and online tutorials, activists prepared to write letters of commentary and protest to the DEC and Governor Cuomo, and to speak at public hearings that the department was organizing around the state. Pro-gas speakers predictably focused on the jobs that fracking would create.

Opponents included an impressive line-up of scientists (among them Robert

Howarth, co-author of last year’s landmark Cornell University study, which established the staggering greenhouse-gas footprint of fracking), engineers, lawyers and other professionals. A letter sent to Cuomo by 250 New York State physicians and medical professionals deplored the DEC’s failure to attend to the public health impacts of fracking.

In one public agency meeting, part-time Cooperstown resident James “Chip” Northrup, a retired manager for Atlantic

Richfield (ARCO, America’s seventh largest oil corporation), called the performances of pro-gas speakers “disgraceful” and the SGEIS “junk science.” Citing an industry study that shows 25 percent of frack wells leak after five years and 40 percent after eight, he said, “Everybody in the industry knows that gas drilling pollutes groundwater.”

As 2012 began, the movement was demanding that the department withdraw the SGEIS. In mid-January, DEC spokesperson Lisa King said that once all the comments are tallied, “We expect the total to be more than 40,000.” Earlier, agency officials had told *The New York Times* they didn’t know of any other issue that had received even 1,000 comments. Gannett’s Albany Bureau has reported that anti-drilling submissions outnumber those of drilling supporters by at least ten to one.

Sustainable Otsego’s website lists 52 serious and fatal flaws in the document. A letter posted on the website of Toxics Targeting ([toxicstargeting.com](http://toxicstargeting.com)), an environmental database service in Ithaca, elaborately details 17 major SGEIS flaws. By Jan. 10, when the

Toxics Targeting letter was sent to the DEC and the Governor, it had more than 22,000 signatures representing government officials, professional and civic organizations, and individuals. (The DEC counts this letter with its signatures as only one of the 40,000 comments.)

At a Nov. 17 rally in Trenton, N.J., to celebrate the postponement of a vote on allowing fracking in the Delaware River Basin, activists from Pennsylvania and New York pledged future civil disobedience. “The broad coalition of anti-frackers has been operating on multi-levels all at once,” says Sustainable Otsego’s chair, Adrian Kuzminsky. If the governor approves the SGEIS “there will be massive disillusionment with the state government and Cuomo, and from what I’m hearing there will be ‘direct action’ and civil disobedience in some quarters.”

Should the government approve the SGEIS in its current form, lawsuits are planned against the DEC. And a brief “Occupy DEC” event that took place in the state capital, Albany, on Jan. 12 may have set the tone for the future. Meanwhile, some activists are already working on legislation that would criminalize fracking.

This past November, Sandra Steingraber told a crowd of hundreds of activists why she was donating her \$100,000 Heinz Award to the movement. The money, she said, “enables speech, emboldens activism, and recognizes that true security for our children lies in preserving the ... ecology of our planet.”

She raised a jar of water. “This is what my kids are made of. They are made of water. They are made of the food that is grown in the county that I live in. And they are made of air. We inhale a pint of atmosphere with every breath we take. ... And when you poison these things, you poison us. That is a violation of our human rights, and that is why this is the civil rights issue of our day.”

*Ellen Cantarow is a Boston-based journalist who examines the effects of oil and gas corporations.*

*A version of this article was originally published on TomDispatch.com.*



**NO FRACKING WAY:** Riverkeeper President Paul Gallay, of Ossining, N.Y., speaks to supporters at a rally outside a Nov. 30 Department of Environmental Conservation hearing in Manhattan.

next 15 to 20 minutes you would do a whole lot more education.” In the end, 1,500 out of 3,000 registered voters signed. This past summer the Ulysses town board voted to ban fracking.

Middlefield, 119 miles east of Ulysses and home of the grassroots group Middlefield Neighbors, enacted a similar ban. So did Dryden, 22 miles east of Ulysses. An out-of-state gas corporation that leased land for drilling in Dryden is suing to get the zoning ban declared illegal. A Middlefield land-



# A Pathetic Press Helps Cover for Police Misdeeds

BY ARI PAUL

The New York Police Department's cover-up of its decision to show an anti-Muslim film to officers in counter-terrorism training has many culprits: the sergeant who chose the film; Police Commissioner Ray Kelly, who participated in the project; and NYPD spokesman Paul Browne, who lied about it.

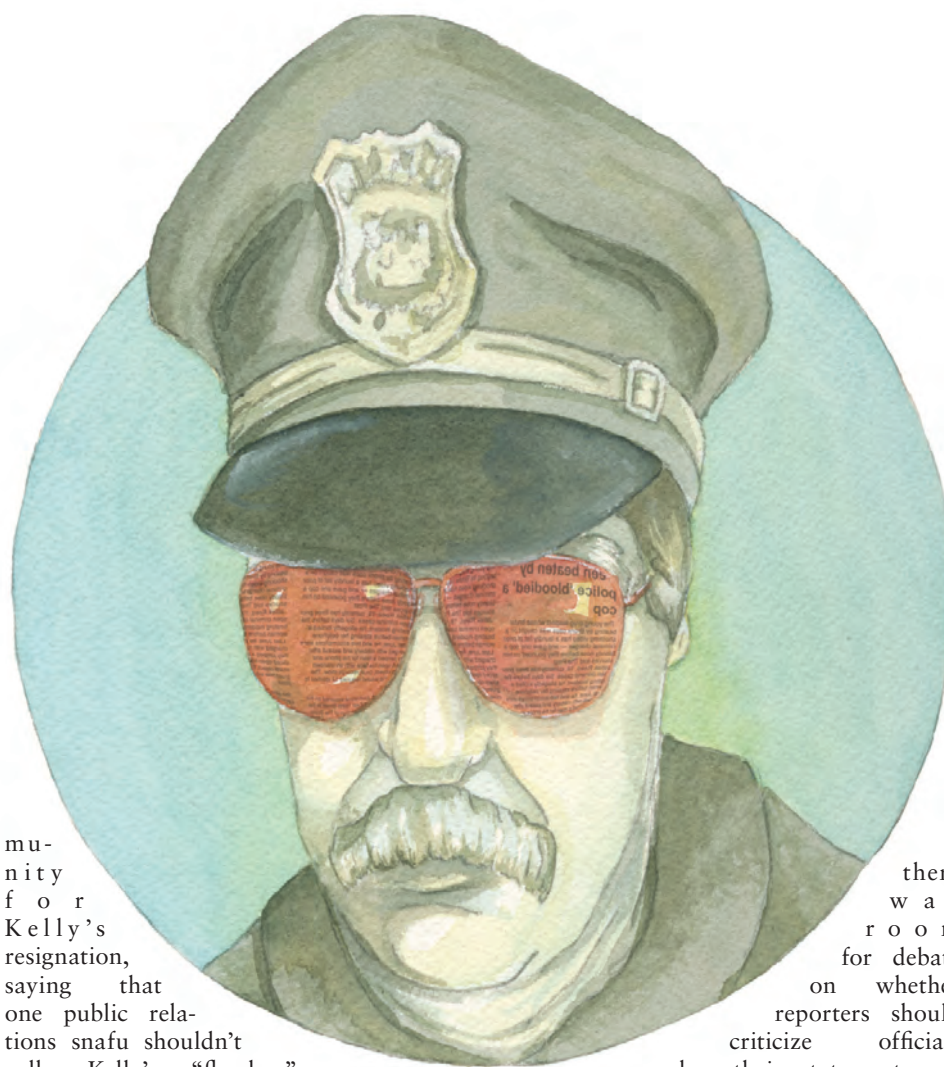
But there's another party to blame for this debacle: the New York City press. While credit should be given to Michael Powell of *The New York Times* for bringing the issue to light, the papers and networks only mentioned in passing how deceitful the department — all the way up to Browne, a deputy commissioner for public information — had been.

Police critics, however, already knew Browne had a long history of lying to the press. When Deputy Inspector Anthony Bologna pepper-sprayed nonviolent female protesters at an Occupy Wall Street protest in Union Square last September, Browne claimed the women were obstructing police actions. This claim was later proven false by video footage.

The *Daily News*' editorial board scoffed at calls from the Muslim com-

munity for Kelly's resignation, saying that one public relations snafu shouldn't sully Kelly's "flawless" tenure. Revelations about the film came in the wake of concerns about an elaborate NYPD espionage program targeting Muslims that was uncovered by an Associated Press investigation. The *Times*' board said that a reprimand for the sergeant who showed the film wasn't "remotely enough," but only called on top cop Kelly to apologize.

In the background of all this, the *Times*' public editor, Arthur Brisbane, noted that



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reporters into silence, Kelly threatens them with 'consequences' for negative stories." If a reporter from one tabloid reveals something the commissioner doesn't like, then the next big crime exclusive goes to its competitor. Levitt himself, a long-time *Newsday* columnist, had his press pass revoked after one too many embarrassing stories about Kelly.

And there are more insidious examples. In 2008, when three officers were acquitted in the murder of Sean Bell, the Detectives' Endowment Association barred a *Daily News* reporter and four of the paper's photographers from attending a press conference with the officers because the publication had given too much credence to the prosecution and the Bell family. Access to department insiders can make or break a crime reporter's career, making it easy for police to scare foot soldiers of the Fourth Estate into sycophancy.

Only the website Gawker had the courage to demand the obvious: "To tell two different reporters, a year apart, that Kelly was never interviewed for a film he appeared in, and that Browne himself recommended Kelly be interviewed for [emphasis in original], is almost pathological. He is paid by New York's taxpayers, and should be fired."

there was room for debate on whether reporters should criticize officials

when their statements are clearly false or if they should let the statements stand and let readers decide. Most of the media, sadly, go with the latter. Part of this is journalism's cult of objectivity. But there's something more systemic in the media's tame treatment of One Police Plaza.

Police reporter Leonard Levitt writes in his 2009 book, *NYPD Confidential*, "[T]he police department under Kelly is now more closed than it was under Giuliani. While Giuliani's belligerence intimidated

## NYPD A 2013 CAMPAIGN ISSUE

The New York Police Department is larger than most standing armies, and yet, unlike other city agencies it operates with nearly no independent oversight. In light of so many scandals in the department — ticket fixing, the spying on Muslim communities, violence against peaceful protesters and allegations of CompStat manipulation — the public is demanding transparency.

That is why the Police Reform Organizing Project (PROP), which operates in conjunction with the Urban Justice Center, is drafting legislation to create an independent oversight body that

has subpoena power. Currently, the NYPD operates outside the purview of the city's Department of Investigation, and the Civilian Complaint Review Board only investigates individual complaints, not systemic problems.

"The police have so much political independence, you have to have an independent monitoring group," said Alex Vitale, a professor of sociology at Brooklyn College who studies policing and criminology, and serves as a PROP advisor. "The police routinely don't come to hearings where they are invited. They resist requests for information."

The Police Reform Organizing Project is also trying to inject the issues of police abuse into the 2013 race for mayor and other city

offices, in particular, the use of stop-and-frisk in communities of color, treatment of sex workers, harassment of street vendors, aggressive tactics against demonstrators and protocol for emotional disturbed persons. The hope is that PROP can get assurances from candidates that if elected, they will attempt to rein in the police.

"I think that's going to happen," Vitale said.

People can get involved by visiting [policereformorganizingproject.org](http://policereformorganizingproject.org).

—A.P.



# NYPD Outta Control

By John Tarleton

GUN-RUNNING, PLANTING DRUGS, SPYING ON ENTIRE COMMUNITIES, SPEWING RACIST EPITHETS ON ON-LINE FORUMS, PEPPER-SPRAYING PROTESTERS, ROUGHING UP CITY COUNCILMEMBERS, CONDUCTING STOP-AND-FRISK SEARCHES AT RECORD RATES AND GUNNING DOWN AN UNARMED TEENAGER IN HIS GRANDMOTHER'S HOME. THAT'S JUST SOME OF WHAT THE NYPD HAS BEEN UP TO RECENTLY. NEW YORK CITY'S FINEST AND THEIR SUPPORTERS TREAT EACH OUTRAGE AS AN ABERRATION, WHEN THEY BOTHER TO ACKNOWLEDGE THEIR CRITICS AT ALL. BUT TAKEN AS A WHOLE WHAT EMERGES IS A DEPARTMENT THAT IS A LAW UNTO ITSELF.

## TICKET-FIXING

When 16 officers were arraigned Oct. 28 on charges emanating from a ticket-fixing scandal that has engulfed the department, hundreds of their brethren packed the Bronx Courthouse. They unleashed what *The New York Times* described as a "stunning display of vitriol" — blocking traffic, sullying the courthouse with refuse, taunting neighbors by welfare recipients and grabbing journalists' cameras to keep them from documenting the proceedings. While police union officials insist ticket-fixing for friends, family and the well-connected is a "professional courtesy," prosecutors say it is a crime that costs the city millions in revenue.

## MASSIVE SURVEILLANCE

Since 9/11, members of New York City's Muslim community have suspected they were being monitored by the NYPD. But no one knew the exact scale of the NYPD's surveillance until the end of last summer when reports by the Associated Press and NYPD Confidential's Leonard Levitt detailed the "Moroccan Initiative," an NYPD spying operation that probed into every nook and cranny of the city's Moroccan community. According to documents obtained by Levitt, the NYPD compiled information on 250 mosques, 12 Islamic schools, 31 Muslim student associations and 263 places it calls "ethnic hotspots," such as businesses and restaurants. On Feb. 18 the AP reported that the NYPD has tracked Muslim students across the Northeast, going so far as to send an undercover informant to keep tabs on Muslim students from the City College of New York during a whitewater rafting trip in the spring of 2008.

## PROMOTING ISLAMAPHOBIA

The documentary film *The Third Jihad* gives voice to the loopy, far right fantasy about Muslim extremists seeking to take over America that has plagued our culture like a bad dream for the past decade. This film is good for scaring the bejezus out of red-state yahoos but no respectable city official in multi-pole, right? Think again. Police Commissioner Ray Kelly gave an interview to the film's director and the movie was shown on "a continuous loop" to roughly 1,500 officers receiving anti-terrorism training over a period of time that spanned between three months to a year. Communicating through his spokesperson, Paul Browne (see page 9), Kelly initially denied giving the interview and claimed that the movie was only mistakenly shown a couple of times to members of his force. When journalists ferreted out the truth, Kelly and Browne had to fess up to their lies.

## POLITICALLY MOTIVATED SPYING

On Feb. 13, veteran police reporter Leonard Levitt reported that New York police had spied on a May 3, 2008 meeting of Rev. Al Sharpton's National Action Network at which plans were made for organizing protests in response to the acquittal of three NYPD officers in the shooting of Sean Bell. In the same report, Levitt also described how two undercover officers had told him in 1998 that they had previously been tasked with spreading rumors that Sharpton was gay.

## SHOOTING UNARMED CIVILIANS

A cop opens fire on a young man of color and then asks questions later. From Amadou Diallo to Timothy Stansbury, Jr. to Sean Bell, it's a familiar ritual in New York: a shot dead in his grandmother's home in the Bronx after fleeing plainclothes narcotics police. The officers, Richard Haste, who gunned down Graham, 18, apartment without a warrant. Graham was unarmed at the time of the shooting. Haste's partner told investigators that Haste identified himself as a police officer, told Graham to show his hands and then yelled "gun, gun" before firing. Graham's grandmother, however, maintains that the officers did not state their identities before entering the home and that Haste did not say anything to Graham before shooting him.

## SOARING STOP-AND-FRISK NUMBERS

The number of New Yorkers subjected to police stop-and-frisks in 2011 grew to 684,000, a 14 percent increase over the previous year. Of those targeted in 2011, 85 percent were Black or Latino and 88 percent were innocent of any crime, according to the New York Civil Liberties Union. Four million New Yorkers have endured stop-and-frisks since 2004. One of the results of this police tactic is a heavy load of pot cases — roughly 50,000 a year — or enough to fill Yankee Stadium.

## RACIST RANTS

The police officers who joined a Facebook page last September to gripe about having to cover the annual West Indian Day Parade weren't looking to friend Brooklyn's Caribbean community. Officers described parade goers as "animals," "savages" and "filth" in comments that filled 70 printed pages. One commenter suggested the parade be "moved to the zoo" while another suggested that someone should "drop a bomb and wipe them all out."

## ROUGHING UP CITY COUNCILMEMBERS

While walking to an official function during last September's West Indian Day Parade, City Councilmember Jumaane Williams (D-WFP-East Flatbush) was wrestled to the ground by police and placed in handcuffs despite repeated attempts to identify himself. Ten weeks later another City councilmember, Ydanis Rodriguez (D-WFP-Washington Heights), received cuts to his face when he was forced to the pavement by police as he tried to make his way to Zuccotti Park on the night the Occupy Wall Street encampment was evicted. He was held for 17 hours before being released on charges of disorderly conduct and resisting arrest.

## PLANTING DRUGS

Corruption in the Brooklyn South narcotics unit led to the arrests of eight police officers for planting drugs or lying under oath, the dismissal of hundreds of tainted drug cases and payouts of more than \$1 million to settle false arrests lawsuits. During the trial last fall of one of the narcotics detectives accused of planting drugs, ex-cop Stephen Anderson revealed that the practice — known as "flaking" — was used to meet arrest quotas. "It was something I was seeing a lot of, whether it was from supervisors or undercovers and even investigators," Anderson testified. "Seeing it so much, it's almost like you have no emotion with it. The mentality was that they attach the bodies to it, they're going to be out of jail tomorrow anyway."

## GUN RUNNING

Before he was netted in an FBI sting last October, William Masso, an 18-year police veteran, bragged to a government informant that his smuggling ring of eight current and former NYPD officers could move anything from "A to Z." Among his group's haul: black-market cigarettes, stolen slot machines and illegal firearms including three M-16 rifles, one shotgun and 16 handguns. On Feb. 6, Masso became the first defendant in the case to plead guilty. He faces up to six years in prison.

## MANIPULATING CRIME STATS

Suspicion that New York's miraculously low crime rate is built on rigged numbers has festered for years. In 2005, leaders of the Patrolmen's and Sergeant's Benevolent Associations alleged the department under Police Commissioner Ray Kelly was downgrading felonies to misdemeanors. In 2009, police whistleblower Adrian Schoolcraft alleged that higher-ups were doctoring crime stats. In 2010, two academics released a survey of more than 100 retired senior police officers who said that intense pressure to lower crime rates had prompted them to manipulate crime statistics across the city. Kelly appointed a three-person commission last year to study the matter but it still has yet to issue a report, despite the fact that it is more than six months past due.

## OCCUPY WALL STREET

Beginning with the unprovoked pepper-spraying of a pair of defenseless female protesters that helped Occupy Wall Street (OWS) go viral, the NYPD played a starring role in the OWS protests as it put its casual brutality and its militarized tactics on full display. There were more than 1,300 OWS-related arrests in New York last fall, about a fourth of the total Occupy arrests nationwide during that time. During their Nov. 15 raid that demolished the Zuccotti Park encampment, police dressed in storm trooper gear tossed the OWS library's donated collection of more than 5,000 books into garbage trucks and dumpsters — most of the texts were never recovered.



Sources: NYPDConfidential.com, New York Times, Wall Street Journal, New York World, NYCLU, Associated Press, Huffington Post, The Independent, PSC/Clarion, DNAinfo.com.



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# Tunnel Vision

Continued from page 7

faces, or the screen of the iPod suddenly became interesting. She walked up and down the train pleading with a phantom, and then left at the next stop. None of us felt scared. But we did feel oddly embarrassed for her, a woman who if not starry-eyed crazy had at least forsaken the world we lived in for her own.

Here we live in public isolation. We don’t expect to listen to each other in public. We wade through the crowd to that person waiting for us on the other side. Or we talk on the cell phone as those around us become a blurry backdrop of faces. And while doing so, we pass those who talk to themselves out loud, the Ranters, the Crazies. In New York, a comforting line is drawn between them and us — but if you look at it closer, you see a spectrum. Who among us hasn’t finished an argument, half muttering, half

yelling at the absent other on our way to the subway? Who hasn’t re-enacted a scene while inside the train, your face moving as if the other was truly there and then looked up and saw someone was watching you? New York is a city of eight million stories and we each tell our own in a constant and lonely monologue.

These are only four subway dictionary entries. Each one materializes the invisible, unspoken definitions we inherit from New York about New York. Hundreds more can be written. Because how we travel underground, compressing time and space in a shared silence, in shared surveillance, in contest over space and in pity for those unashamed to spill their private worlds into public, in all this is the experience that defines how we live above ground. The subway is the center of our city; it makes us into its image even as we ignore this humming beneath the ground, constant and like a glorious song rising through us.

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# Hungary's Right-Wing Threat

BY ARI PAUL

From Nazi occupiers to the Soviet-backed puppet regime, Hungarians have known their share of despots. Now, at the prodding of human rights groups, the European Union is confronting a Hungarian government — led by the conservative ruling party Fidesz (Hungarian Civil Union) — that some say is bringing the country dangerously close to the fascism Europe has been striving to bury in the history books.

Party leader and current Prime Minister Viktor Orbán led Fidesz to a sweeping victory in 2010 and a two-thirds majority in parliament. The party had enough votes to amend the constitution, and the changes that went into effect last month, critics say, are meant to allow the party to tighten its grip on power and stifle human rights.

For example, Human Rights Watch (HRW) has said that the new provisions in the constitution grant a judge the ability to strip away an individual's right to vote if he or she is deemed mentally incapable. Many such partisan changes are effectively permanent — the ruling party has recently amended the constitution to require a super-majority for major policy votes. Moreover, government officials with power over the courts, budget and media have been given longer terms, and Fidesz party loyalists have filled the posts.

An HRW report published last month said that the legal changes “create a new National Judiciary Office (NJO), whose presi-

dent has the sole authority to appoint most judges. Together with the chief prosecutor, also a recent appointee, the NJO president can decide which judge should hear a case.” It goes on to say that the NJO “effectively neutralizes the Constitutional Court, which has issued a series of critical rulings against the government, as a check on state power. The person appointed president of the Judiciary Office is the wife of a leading member of the Fidesz party.”

In fact, Viktor Orbán's dismissal of nearly 100 serving judges led the European Commission to file infringement proceedings against Hungary last month. European Commission President José Manuel Barroso said of his meeting with Orbán about the charges: “We had a comprehensive and constructive discussion. The prime minister indicated Hungary's readiness to address swiftly the issues raised by the Commission. ... I also reiterated that there are wider political concerns that the Hungar-

ian government needs to address.”

Human rights groups have also raised concerns over a new government office regulating the media that can close media outlets deemed to be imbalanced. Human Rights Watch reported that “an independent talk radio station, Klubrádió, lost its license in December and will close in March. Large numbers of journalists working for the state broadcaster have been dismissed, ostensibly for efficiency but in some cases the dismissals appear to be linked to their objections to government interference in editorial matters.”

A report released last month by the Committee to Protect Journalists, an independent nonprofit organization based in New York City, said, “State media outlets are under firm control in Hungary. The state Hungarian News Agency, MTI, provides most of its services to media organizations free of charge. This suppresses competition in the news market, resulting in

a kind of copy-and-paste journalism, especially at smaller media outlets with limited resources. The state radio and television stations predominantly echo official viewpoints. The most striking case occurred when the image of the former chief justice was blurred in a December TV news show because he had previously expressed criticism toward government.”

The Committee to Protect Journalists also noted that while this has led to a popular backlash, including a hunger strike by unionists and journalists and demanding reforms, their calls have fallen on deaf ears.

Orbán has been open to talks with E.U. officials about improving the country's human rights standards to meet those of the E.U. But what is truly frightening is that despite Fidesz's power in numbers, it faces opposition from the anti-Semitic, anti-Roma, far-right Jobbik party (Movement for a Better Hungary), which last month held a 2,000-member anti-E.U. demonstration in Budapest calling for Hungary to leave the bloc.

The situation with Fidesz is one more headache for the E.U., which is mired in the ongoing European debt crisis. While far-right nationalist parties have gained attention and supporters throughout the continent with their anti-immigrant and racist demonstrations, we are actually seeing the E.U. worry about the attacks on democracy from a ruling party, which emerged not from the extreme right-wing, but from the mainstream conservative movement.



## WORLD BRIEFS

### Developments from around the world

#### EUROPE

Human Rights Watch has called on the French government to investigate a new wave of aggressive police tactics against young black and Arab men, saying cops use racial profiling to make random stops and searches even when there is no evidence of wrongdoing, and that “insulting language, including racial slurs, are not uncommon, and some stops involve excessive use of force by the police.” Police aggression and geographic isolation of the black and Arab communities have long caused tensions in French cities and led to the 2005 civil unrest across France.

#### LATIN AMERICA

Ex-Guatemalan military chief Efraín Ríos Montt will face charges of genocide. Guatemalan human rights campaigner Eduardo de León told reporters last month, “The justice system is settling debts it had with indigenous people and society for grave human rights violations.” In the 1950s, the CIA helped overthrow a democratically elected left-wing government and imposed a reactionary regime that initiated ethnic violence. The United States then provided the military leader with arms, and President Ronald Reagan heralded him as an enemy of communism. Mayan villagers were slaughtered under his watch in 1982 and 1983 during the height of the government's 35-year military campaign against left-wing rebels.

#### AFRICA

The humanitarian group Doctors Without Borders announced last month that it was suspending operations in Misrata, Libya, after detainees were tortured and denied medical care. The group's general director, Christopher Stokes, said, “Patients were brought to us in the middle of interrogation for medical care, in order to make them fit for further interrogation. This is unacceptable.” Efforts to pressure military leaders to cease torture proved useless, Stokes said. The revelation has given credence to skeptics of the NATO-led campaign to assist the Libyan rebellion against the former regime; many have said human rights violations were perpetrated by both sides of the conflict.

#### EAST ASIA

A Tibetan activist was shot and killed by Chinese security forces in Sichuan province last month. The BBC reported that the shooting occurred after a Tibetan citizen distributed pamphlets saying “the immolations would not stop unless Tibet was free and the exiled Tibetan spiritual leader the Dalai Lama was allowed to return.” The province, east of the Tibetan Autonomous Region, has been on security lockdown, with roadblocks and communications lines cut. This marks the third such murder since unrest against Chinese rule of Tibet increased after a monk set himself on fire in March. Since then, there have been 15 other incidents of self-immolations.

#### SOUTH/CENTRAL ASIA

Burmese dissident Aung San Suu Kyi is on the campaign trail for parliamentary elections in April. Since 1962, Burma, also known as Myanmar, has been ruled by a military junta, which held on to power by force in 1990 after Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy won a landslide victory in free elections. She has spent 15 of the last 23 years under house arrest. In December, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton visited Burma to encourage more liberalization, although democracy advocates outside the country have said the junta's efforts of reform have been few and far between.

#### MIDDLE EAST

Secretary General of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent Abd-al-Razzaq Jbeiro was killed near the Syrian town of Khan Shaykhu while riding in a van marked with the Red Crescent, the group said last month. Government violence against pro-democracy protesters has amplified since May, with some 5,000 protesters reportedly killed. Activists claim that the current military crackdown in Damascus has been the worst fighting in the last 10 months. Syrian president Bashar Al-Assad, who has ruled the country since 2000, justified the violence against the Arab Spring protesters, claiming that they are backed by foreign governments. The Arab League has suspended Syria due to human rights violations.

—A.P.



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# Her Song in a Pill THE DEATH OF WHITNEY HOUSTON

BY NICHOLAS POWERS

I first saw Whitney Houston in the 1987 music video “I Wanna Dance with Somebody (Who Loves Me).” She was bouncy and confident with the wide, universal smile of a professional performer. I was in middle school at the time, and one of my relatives leaned over and pointed an accusatory finger at the television screen. “This girl used to sing Gospel and now it’s all about sex,” she intoned. “It’s Satan’s music.”

Confused, I sensed that Houston’s career served as a battleground over values. She was a good girl going bad, maybe not fully there yet but quickly descending. Looking back, it was a silly and stupid thing to think, but in it was the public judgment that created the unbridgeable chasm that split Houston’s life in two. On one side was the polished pop music diva, whose soaring voice was itself an anthem and on the other, a woman with a taste for bad men, liquor and cocaine. Like a shadow growing as the sun sets, Ghetto Whitney slowly overpowered Pop Whitney.

However fashionable it is to critique celebrities as overpaid mannequins for capitalism (which they often are), it does not negate the fact that we need them, especially if you are gay or brown or an outsider or just different. Any minority looks to its celebrities as trailblazers leading the way to Mainstream America. Stars illuminate the path to the center and we follow them, seeing in their meltdowns and victories the dangerous, warping pressures to come.

At 48 years old, Whitney Houston joins Michael Jackson (who died at 52) and Tupac Shakur and Biggie Smalls (killed at 25 and 24, respectively), as another Black artist felled by the fatal vortex of desire between what they needed from us and what we needed from them.

We loved Whitney for being a church-going girl who charmed the nation with her beauty and girl-next-door approachability. Our kids sang “The Greatest Love of All” in their wobbly voices at school talent shows. She lifted us into a transcendent communion at the 1991 Super Bowl through a soaring version of “The Star Spangled Banner.” She was wooed by Kevin Costner in the 1992 film *The Bodyguard*. We loved her for being

sations, I traded Whitney stories with others. Did you hear about the filthy bathroom littered with rocks of cocaine, a crack pipe and blackened spoons? Did you hear about Bobby taking her money? Did you hear her voice? It was the manic gossip of a people who — betrayed so many times — mistake wretchedness for authenticity.

We talked about her this way because Whitney was a vehicle for integration. She

was an image of blackness that white America could buy, and in doing so gave us cultural leverage in return. And to the degree she ascended we praised her, but felt an unease that it came at a price we ultimately could not pay. During the 1989 Soul Train Awards she was booed by some Black audience members for abandoning the soul tradition for a bleached pop vocal style. It hurt her deeply, and during an interview with Katie Couric in 1996 she said, “Sometimes it gets down to that, you know? You’re not Black enough for them. I don’t know. You’re not R&B enough. You’re very pop. The white audience has taken you away from them.”

But when she fell, she landed in Black arms. Cradling her, we began the ritual of resurrection and applauded her as she reappeared on stage, thin as a flagpole and her voice a tattered flag blowing in a song of loss. It was too late. Ghetto Whitney had grown too powerful and no amount of forgiveness or salvation could stop her.

She drank away Pop Whitney’s voice, spent her money, cancelled her shows and did not stop until she died.

Whitney died so young because, like Michael and Biggie and Tupac and others that will follow, she straddled Black America’s double-consciousness. We see the image others have of us and the one we have of ourselves and when they move too far apart, we fall and fall and fall. And no amount of singing can fill the void.



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And in that desperate, perverse way of Black America, we loved her fall. It was as if her marriage to former New Edition member and perennial bad boy Bobby Brown showed that she didn’t really climb out of our reach. On the stoop, in the barbershop and in the beauty parlor, Whitney was laughed at as a pipe-head, a trick turned by a low-down man, a ruined princess. In so many conver-

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# Oh, for the Days When the Government Underwrote Radical Art

“The Radical Camera: New York’s Photo League, 1936–1951”  
THE JEWISH MUSEUM  
1109 FIFTH AVE.  
THROUGH MARCH 25

Our story begins: folks gather in Union Square to demand assistance and recompense for the unemployed, but they’re assailed by the media and arrested by police. No, this footage isn’t from an Occupy Wall Street-inspired protest — it’s from a 1931 film on view at the Jewish Museum’s “The Radical Camera,” an exhibition that details the New York Photo League’s efforts to document working class life from 1936 to 1951.

“Workers Newsreel Unemployment Special” plays on a loop at the entrance of the show and is a product of the explicitly communist Film and Photo League, a group created by the Berlin-based Workers International Relief in 1930. The film highlights the sort of agitprop that the group abandoned when it split in 1936 into two groups — Frontier Films and the Photo League.

This break, however, didn’t mean that the group abandoned politics altogether. As with many artistic and cultural organizations of the era, the Photo League received funding from President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Works Projects Administration to document American life. For members of the league — primarily Jews from immigrant families with a penchant for social justice — this meant protests and parades, struggling workers and catch-as-catch-can kids’ games, Lower East Side slums and hot Harlem parties, clattering el trains and Coney Island strolls. The Photo League was out to forge an expansive and beautiful sort of documentary photography — balancing aesthetics with plaintive social relevance. By all accounts, it succeeded.

“The Radical Camera” is comprehensive but not overwhelming, evoking a bygone era of New York City. (While looking at Sy Kettelson’s 1949 photo of an ad-festooned subway car, one viewer remarked: “This is the subway that I remember.”) The Photo League counted some of the 20th century’s legendary photographers among its ranks (or as affiliated friends), including Paul Strand, Aaron Siskind and Lisette Model. But some of the best photos in the show come from less revered names — works that embody the league’s dualistic ethos, balancing face-front social realism with an unfussy formal elegance. Lucy Ashjian’s 1938 Harlem street scene shows the immediate wake of an accident: a small crowd with all eyes massed upon something located outside of the frame. We learn nothing about the accident itself, but the picture speaks vol-



Butterfly Boy, New York, Jerome Liebling (1949)

THE JEWISH MUSEUM, NEW YORK

umes on the sunlit, stoic New York street life of the Depression era. Similarly, Dan Weiner’s 1949 photo of the laying of the cornerstone of the U.N. building turns away from the (assumed) spectacle, capturing instead a group of ordinary looking men, gazing out and bearing historical witness. Weegee’s flash-lit 1940 photo of a Second Avenue bagel-pusher is both eerie and affectionate. Morris Engel’s 1947 14th Street photo shows

work tended toward semi- abstraction. This approach yielded some wonderful pictures (like Leon Levinstein’s undated photo of a close-cropped, off-kilter crowd scene), but the earnest beauty of these shots tragically lacked the political relevance of the group’s previous work. The group called it quits in 1951.

The Photo League’s work is classic and old-fashioned, but it’s not stuffy. It’s retained a good bit of its in-the-moment incipience. With the advent of the handheld 35-millimeter camera, the League’s work was cutting-edge, made by people new to photography (many of them in their early to mid-20s). The League also functioned as a meeting place for novice and up-and-coming photographers alike, offering classes, hosting parties and featuring a low-cost darkroom.

In the present, photographic technology has undergone a profound democratization — cameras are everywhere — yet when it comes to achieving a similar level of government-funded, socially engaged photography, a vacuum exists. As far as the arts are concerned, our culture often seems stuck in a Cold War stalemate (can you imagine federal money going to a group of communist-affiliated, Jewish 20-somethings to take pictures of New York City?). Make no mistake: amid the glut of websites like Flickr and Tumblr there are great photographs by politically engaged artists, but how often do you see groups of photographers committed to both aesthetics and social justice, with a supportive government recognizing (and underwriting) the cultural importance of creative, progressive documentary art? Oh, well — maybe next crisis.

—MIKE NEWTON

*mattilda bernstein sycamore asks:*

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## Cornered

"The Greatest Grid: The Master Plan of Manhattan, 1811-2011"  
MUSEUM OF THE CITY OF  
NEW YORK  
220 FIFTH AVE.  
THROUGH JULY 15

Strange things happen to people who live too long in New York City. We stop using compass directions and refer instead to "uptown" and "downtown." Our first thought on entering an attractive apartment is how high the rent is. Even more ubiquitous is our disdain for street addresses, preferring the much more elegant "27th and Sixth," "115th and First." Address in four syllables or less — what could be more convenient?

This iconic aspect of Manhattan's city plan is on display in "The Greatest Grid," an exhibition that is equal parts backstory and tribute, now showing at the Museum of the City of New York. Laid out in one multi-cubed room, designed to mimic the intersection of streets and avenues, the city plan's history elucidates its creation as it elevates the city commissioners who invented it to the level of deities.

In 1807, the City Council of New York appointed a three-man commission, consisting of Gouverneur Morris, John Rutherford, and Simeon De Witt, to establish a comprehensive street plan for the city, giving them unprecedented authority and access to the city's land. In 1811, they presented their plan, which, with a few modifications, is the Manhattan we now know.

History nerds will delight in the abundance of eye candy. A rich selection of maps tracks the transformation of the island from fallow land to orderly squares. When the grid was imposed, the commission's surveyor, John Randel, painstakingly mapped all the future blocks on top of existing properties. (These individual maps have been digitally stitched together for the exhibition, and can be perused on several monitors.) Alongside, we see a few stunning depictions of street views and many photographs of neighborhoods in various stages of development. Some, like a neat row of identical brownstones hiding behind a pit of dirt, make you laugh with their incongruity.

Some of the pride is justified. The numbering of Manhattan's streets and avenues make it "unique among U.S. cities," we learn, and the sheer size of the grid — which was initially planned only up to 155th Street but now extends, in some fashion, to the tip of the island — makes it unique in the world.

New York's blocks are smaller



Aerial View of Madison Square, J.S. Johnston (1894)

than those in many other grid cities, which is a boon to street life, but can be a detriment to home life. In Barcelona, much of the downtown is also centered on a grid, but planners took pains to create large blocks, some of which measure 400 by 500 feet, so that every block can have an interior courtyard. The commissioners' plan, in contrast, did not include backstreets or alleys, so that garbage collection and socializing both took place in the open.

The grid almost single-handedly created the real estate market. "Strait-sided [sic] & right-angled houses are the most cheap to build," the commissioners declared. (No surprise here that the show is sponsored by several real estate groups, including Silverstein Properties, the Vornado Realty Trust and the Durst Organization.) Indeed, the city's intent, in 1807, to extend a grid northward onto undeveloped land, essentially rezoning a swath of adjacent countryside several times larger than the presently settled land, is praised as an act of "brazen ambition" in the show's text; in his introduction to the accompanying book, Mayor Michael Bloomberg calls it "chutzpah."

We get tantalizing glimpses of the many issues of public policy and eminent domain that accompanied such an ambitious plan. Much of the land north of Greenwich Village, then an outlying village to the city of New York, was municipally owned (since a 1796 act granted to the city all land not in private hands). However, there was significant settlement in those areas, shown clearly on maps from that time. When the city opened streets, the effect on surrounding property was assessed and the owners compensated — or charged — for the change.

Putting down streets meant leveling the island, which differed dramatically between the relatively flat East side and the craggy West. (Clement Clarke Moore, a

contemporary of the commissioners, said, "These are men who would have cut down the seven hills of Rome.") An excellent map from the late 19th century stacks cross-sections of Manhattan's elevations to create a comparative topography of the entire island.

While the city built the streets, it left adjacent lots in the hands of their owners, to fill in or level.

The original grid made no room for parks, but the city later subsidized the creation of smaller parks such as Gramercy Park and Madison Square Park (even before the creation of Central Park), reasoning that the increase in value of the surrounding property would result in greater property tax revenues returning to the city.

The exhibition raises more questions than it answers. While we see very detailed results of the commissioners' plan, there is no information in the historic record on why those three men were chosen to create the plan, or how they were chosen, or even how they worked together. In fact, much of the city's human aspect is stripped away, or only discussed in the aggregate language of populations or neighborhoods.

Ultimately, the grid is hard to criticize: it's proven remarkably flexible over the years, adapting to changing uses as individual neighborhoods grow, decline and regenerate. It gives a semblance of order to the unpredictability of the city; it's what we all love (and love to know) about Manhattan. But before city life could adapt to the grid, the grid had to impose itself on an already existing landscape, moving (or destroying) houses and settlements that stood in its way. Much of this history has been forgotten as the grid has become taken for granted as part of our built environment. As a forecast of future urban policy, it is perhaps worth remembering.

—IRINA IVANOVA

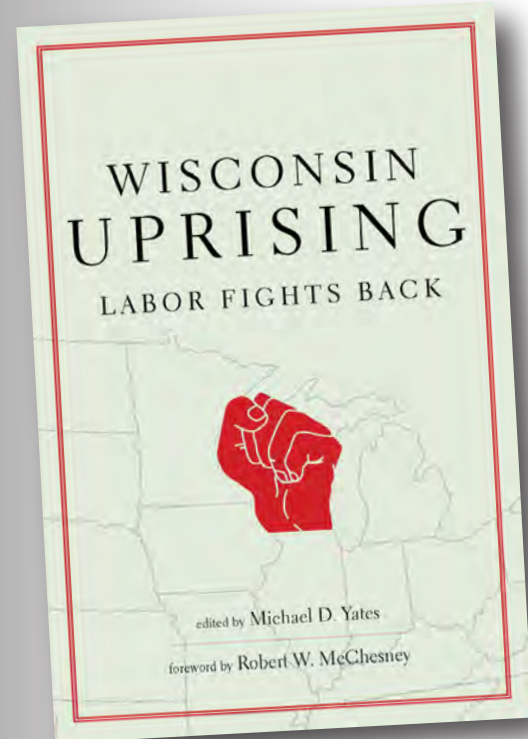
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Diary of an Awkward Black Girl

The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl  
AWKWARDBLACKGIRL.COM

When I was a child, my mother and the rest of my family took great pains to ensure that every doll I owned was black. They wanted all of them to look like me — but they didn’t. Their straight hair was nothing like my own mane of curls. They had only two complexions — neither matched my skin tone. But I appreciated my family’s efforts every time Barbie made a new doll based on the latest Disney movie that never looked remotely like me.

Recently, media representations of black women have made me feel like that little girl walking down the doll aisle at Toys “R” Us all over again. The American imagination has always been fascinated with black women. But recently, more than ever, America has let its imagination run away with it, setting out in search for these predetermined archetypes as if they were after Big Foot.

First, there is the Mammy — the noble matriarch. She is strong, long-suffering. She’s traded in her shuck and jive for education, and she sacrifices her own well-being for the uplift of the race. You can see her on display in every black female pundit on MSNBC, or any role that Angela Bassett has ever

played. Today, she is childless, single and doomed to stay that way. She forgoes children for fear of embarrassing the race as a single mother, and she refuses to date outside of the race. She is the force behind every journalistic “exclusive” about single black women or obese black women. I’m sure she was even the inspiration for that “study,” entitled “Why Are Black Women Ugly?” published last year in *Psychology Today*.

Then there is the Sapphire — the Angry Black Woman. She is the stubborn, bitter woman who chases men away with her ridiculous expectations, remarkably flexible neck, and left hand that rarely detaches from her hip. Chrissy Lampkin from *Love and Hip Hop* was born for this role.

The Sapphire can turn into the Gold Digger by keeping a certain level of anger but leaving spinsterhood behind for tireless pursuit of powerful men. (See NeNe Leakes of *Real Housewives of Atlanta*.) The Gold Digger, in turn, often morphs into the Jezebel, who displays overt sexualization but does not seek commitment or money. Also known as the video hoe.

None of that described me. Or any of the many black women I care about. We’re quirky, complicated, genuine. You know ... human. Where were the reflections of us?

In February of 2011, Issa Rae put her Stanford degree to work to fill that void, creating and starring in the hugely successful web series, *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl and Friends*. From its very name, the series challenges stereotypes about black women, but it doesn’t stop there.

*Awkward Black Girl* revolves around Jay and her socially tricky relationships in the office, in anger management class and even in traffic. She accepts that she is awkward ... and black, and that combination may very

well may be the absolute worst two things one person could be.

But don’t let her awkwardness fool you — Jay is a stereotype-fighting super-heroine. She even comes complete with a sidekick,

CeCe, her Indian best friend, and an arch-nemesis Nina, her fairer skinned co-worker and wannabe boss.

There is no stereotype she can’t slay. Black women only date black men? Even when Jay had a choice between a black man and a white man, she chose the white man. Jay identified more strongly with her awkwardness than her blackness, and she prioritized her own happiness over loyalty.

Black women are loud and angry? Jay’s soft-spoken and passive-aggressive. She’s more likely to secretly throw out your lunch and then go home and write violent rap lyrics about you than to roll her neck. Black women are ugly? Issa Rae is, well, beautiful. And she’s hilarious.

In popular American culture, the black experience is constantly translated and made digestible for non-black, specifically white, audiences. Not *Awkward Black Girl*. Jay could care less about being accepted by any of her co-workers, regardless of race. For the storylines, Issa Rae unapologetically draws on the richness of African American culture. At the risk of alienating some audience members, she incorporates references to black films like *The Color Purple*, *Sister Act* and *House Party*. The entire Halloween episode is an adaptation of the Spike Lee classic *School Daze*.

The 12-episode first season was funded almost entirely by viewer

donations. Thus, *Awkward Black Girl* is beholden to its audience in a way that other productions are not. Thus, when the Crunk Feminist Collective (CFC), an early supporter of the show, objected to Issa Rae’s usage of the term “tranny bitch,” their voices could not be ignored.

Issa Rae responded to the criticism with a succinct acknowledgment mixed with gratitude for CFC’s support. She stated that she would take the feedback to heart, but never apologized for the term’s usage nor the reaction to it. While some have decried her response, others have applauded her decision to stand by her art. Others have pointed to the fact that *Awkward Black Girl* is peppered with terms that are offensive to different groups (it uses “nigga” like salt) and that CFC only objected to the word “tranny,” but not to the word “bitch.”

Perhaps I’m too grateful to take a side. People say that we shouldn’t look to the media for validation of ourselves, but that’s white privilege if I’ve ever heard it. White women can ignore media portrayals of them because they have been validated their entire lives. They never had to ask their mothers why the dolls at Toys “R” Us had funny-looking hair and weird-colored eyes. I never had white dolls — but that meant I had far fewer dolls than my white classmates.

Issa Rae held a mirror up to her face and my face and showed that reflection to the world. Maybe it’s selfish, but as far as I am concerned she can do no wrong and I’ll be donating for season two.

—MARY ANNAÏSE HEGLAR



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